



A LETTER

TO

THE PRESIDENT OF THE MANCHESTER
SCHOOL OF ART,

ON THE

RELATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE AND ART,
UNDER THE SUPERINTENDENCE OF THEIR LORDSHIPS
OF THE BOARD OF TRADE,

TO THE

LOCAL COMMITTEES

OF

PROVINCIAL SCHOOLS OF DESIGN.

BY

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PHYSICIAN TO THE MANCHESTER ROYAL INFIRMARY, &c. &c.;
LATE PHYSICIAN TO H. M. EMBASSY IN PERSIA,
&c. &c. &c.

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TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE MANCHESTER
SCHOOL OF ART.

87, MOSLEY STREET,

July 5th, 1853.

SIR,

I am strongly impressed with the feeling that the earnestness with which the Council of the Manchester School of Design have laboured to promote an improved knowledge of Art in this city, and the success which has attended those efforts in the last four years, [during which its entire management has rested with them,] fairly entitle them to express their opinion on the changes now being introduced by the newly-constituted central management under the Board of Trade, denominated "the Department of Science and Art."

The views of the majority of the Council with regard to the legitimate objects and intentions of National Schools of Design, and the kind of education they should be employed in imparting, are so entirely at variance with those acted upon by the new department of the Board of Trade, that I consider it due to ourselves as well as a public duty to state what our opinions are on the main question at issue.

I shall offer no apology for presuming thus unauthorisedly to become the interpreter of opinions which I share with others; but I shall endeavour, in so far as I have been able to collect them, to render them faithfully. And though I alone am responsible for the opinions I express, I believe they are such as will be very generally concurred in by the gentlemen who compose the Local Councils of the Schools of Design throughout the country; and that they will accord with me in protesting *in toto* against the interference of the Central Department with the system of education that has been so successfully pursued, of late years, in the Manchester School of Design, and which has been very fully explained in the four last Annual Reports issued by the Council.

The Central Department has been so far from communicative with regard

to its ultimate intentions towards this and other Provincial Schools of Design, that for the most part it has left the Local Councils to deduce them from its acts. We are only informed that the Department seeks to establish "an improved and more self-supporting system of management," and ultimately to withdraw the Government Grant—and we gather that it is through the fees expected to be paid to numerous initiatory drawing classes, that the self-supporting element is to become efficient.

It may not at first appear that the new Central Direction is thus introducing any very radical or pernicious change in the general arrangements for conducting and extending Art Education throughout the country, if the vulgar error be entertained of considering Schools of Design to be neither more nor less than *drawing schools*; for the whole tendency of the present scheme is only to make them drawing schools, and nothing else. Nor may it seem to be a very decided divergence from the object originally contemplated by Parliament in making a pecuniary grant for their establishment, to employ those funds in teaching only the rudiments of elementary drawing; or to establish mere Schools of Practical Art. But we have only to consider the principles and objects for which the institution of Schools of Design was originally advocated, and a Parliamentary Grant obtained for that purpose, to see that it was never contemplated that these Schools should confine their efforts to teaching mere practical drawing or pattern making, or to instructing apprentices in their trades; their object was to teach the *principles* and cultivate the *science* of Art, and by explaining the sources of beauty and its elements, to promote its improved production by Art workmen, and at the same time endeavour to cultivate their tastes, and instil into the public mind more correct notions on the subject.

Every addition to our historical knowledge of ancient Greece has tended to prove that Design was there cultivated as a science, and carried almost as high as geometry. This science has been almost entirely lost, and can only be recovered, even partially, by encouraging men of genius to devote themselves to its study and rediscovery; but the value of such knowledge is not so obvious to the public as to create a demand for it sufficient to render the devotion of time and labour it requires remunerative to its professor.

The total absence of this kind of scientific knowledge of the principles of Design, and the deficiency of national good taste in this country were acknowledged facts, the true cause of which is to be found in the history of our centuries of civil war, and in the effects of the Reformation, by which any germs of more cultivated taste previously implanted or imported were eradicated and lost. On the Continent, on the other hand, refined taste was an inheritance of the people, of which our peasantry have absolutely nothing. The high cultivation of this quality in ancient Greece and Rome was, as it were, impressed upon the very soil, preserved by ancient monuments, and handed down, as a family tradition, from generation to generation, in France, Italy, Spain, and the countries of the Rhine and Danube.

Parliament deemed it a matter of national importance to take means for the improvement of taste in this country, in order if possible to raise us to a level in that respect with our Continental competitors in Civilization and Trade. By the accordance of a Grant for that purpose, a great principle was established, calculated to rescue Art-Education, in course of time, from the hands of Empirical pretenders, for it seemed to place this study in the same category with other Arts and Sciences, for the cultivation of which the institution and maintenance of Colleges and Professorships, at the charge of the nation, was a long established and cherished principle, and it gave hopes that men of genius might thus be encouraged to devote their energies to the investigation of principles the want of which gives rise to an annual waste of both public and private funds, in the production of bad ornament, to an amount altogether beyond calculation.

In the absence, on the part of our populace, of any knowledge or feeling for Art capable of cultivation, it was necessary to create in them the sentiment called Taste *ab initio*, by teaching it as a lesson; to do this the *principles* had to be taught along with the *practice* of Art, and the only means of doing so was by combining their inculcation with instruction in drawing. Unfortunately, the intentions of Parliament have hitherto been almost nullified in this respect, by the difficulty of finding teachers who had paid sufficient attention to the Science of Design. They could only teach Drawing; and thus arose the great error into which all the Schools of Design fell in the beginning, viz., that of mistaking the means for the end, and thus rendering what ought to have been Academies of Art, mere Drawing Schools, to teach manipulation, to the neglect of the intellectual education of the Artist-Workman.

This error the Council of this School, ably assisted by the Masters, have for years been labouring to correct; and they had reason to congratulate themselves on the progress their pupils were making in the knowledge as well as the practice of Art, when suddenly their best hopes are dashed by the direct tendency of the measures in process of adoption by the Board of Trade to perpetuate and magnify it, and to drive us from the advanced position we were beginning to hold as a School of Art, back into that of a Rudimentary Drawing Academy.

But it may be asked, supposing that we have reason for attributing to Government an intention to confine the character of Art Education in the provinces to mere instruction in drawing, have we not already admitted that the course which the Department of Art proposes to pursue with regard to Schools of Design generally, does derive some excuse from the very imperfect manner in which the objects of the Parliamentary Grant have been attained by many of them? Practically, they have been almost all mere drawing schools, especially that of Somerset House, [which, notwithstanding its immense income, has not even fulfilled the objects of a national Drawing School, insomuch as to have produced a set of correctly drawn examples of the figure;] and we admit it does not much surprise us that the entire misdirection of that great establishment

for many years, and the evil influence of its example on the Provincial Schools, should have led to its entire abolition as a School of Design. Still, it is not without regret that we see an institution that might have been rendered a valuable university for the promotion of artistic knowledge, annihilated at the very time when a higher appreciation of the subject on the part of the public, was beginning to induce men of capacity to devote more attention to its study. This state of things was already improving, and might have done so sooner but for a serious error of management by which the Central School, itself in direct rivalry with those of the Provinces, was constituted the arbitrary ruler over them—the judge and reporter to Parliament on their proficiency. As a principle this was wrong; and the power in their hands being exercised over funds directly derived from Government, and not, as in our case, partly derived from subscribers, through whom the Management is reached by the public voice, the natural consequence was, to render its oligarchy too arbitrary and absolute.

We shall presently see whether this evil has been removed or immensely increased in the new system of management, and how far we are justified in the belief that the whole course of the proceedings of “the Department” tends to establish, in Marlborough House, an absolute Dictatorship over national Art-Education, from which the least evil to be anticipated is the certainty of its inflicting, upon the whole nation, an inextinguishable mannerism.

We shall first trace a few of the steps by which entire and absolute possession of the Government Grant, and subsequently of the sole controul of the teachers, the pupils, the character of the instruction, the examples to be used, and even the right to appropriate a portion of the local revenue of this School of Design, has been assumed by the Central “Department;” while at the same time compliments were being lavished on the Council for the efficiency to which they had brought the School, and assurances reiterated that no interference whatever was contemplated with their management. The passages cited from various documents issued by the Central Department, require that special attention should be drawn to the careful distinction maintained between the words Instruction and Education, the teaching of the Provincial Schools being always characterized as *instruction*, while *education* is reserved for Marlborough House.

The Grant for the present year has been specifically made, “subject to being applied solely in aid of direct instruction, and divided according to such principles as the Board of Trade may prescribe, and not devoted towards salaries of officers, rent, &c., or general local expenses, as heretofore.” “My Lords will require that the Parliamentary Grant for the year ending 31st of March, 1854, should be paid to the following objects:—the present Masters’ salaries; an increase of Masters when necessary, especially for affording instruction to Public Schools; Pupil Teachers; and to deserving Students in holding Scholarships both in Local and Metropolitan Schools, and to Students in training to become Masters; Lectures, and examples for teaching.

"After communication with the Local Committee, my Lords will apportion the grant to these respective items." "As the fees paid by the Students may be considered as the product—partly of the Grants furnished by Parliament, and partly of the funds raised in the locality, My Lords will require, as a condition of receiving Parliamentary aid, that an equitable portion of the fees shall be applied towards instruction; and in accordance with their Minute of the 28th January, 1853, and for reasons given in the Letter of the 30th of June, 1852, which have been sanctioned by the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury,—they propose that such portion of the fees shall be paid to the Master or Masters of the School as part of their income."

When to these excerpts we add that the time of our Masters is now almost completely absorbed by the orders of "the Department," in establishing extramural classes of Rudimentary Drawing, and conducting similar classes in the School,—that the use of certain examples, for the purchase of which the funds of the School are appropriated by "the Department," is made imperative,—that even for the more advanced pupils a certain course of study is dictated,—that the Masters are now paid, appointed, dismissed, and receive all their instructions from "the Department," without reference to the Local Council,—that they are obliged to give in the names of the most promising students as recipients of bursaries for maintaining and educating them in London, at the expense of the Local School—I conceive the case is sufficiently made out that Art-Education in the provinces is to cease—and only Elementary Drawing to be taught in its place—for even were the Local Council to make increased exertions, and find sufficient funds to maintain educational classes in addition to those of the "School of Department," they can do so no longer, for they are deprived of the services of their Masters, and an "*equitable proportion*" of the fees paid for such education is confiscated by "the Department" to their own use. "The Department" believes that Local Councils have quite enough to do in raising funds for payment of rent, light, attendance, &c., and will kindly take all other trouble off their hands, and all the responsibilities of conducting the education of the pupils.

I am not, then, assuming, without sufficient data, that the whole tendency of the present Central Management is to destroy the educational character of Local Schools of Art, and to substitute for them mere Drawing Academies, termed "Schools of Practical Art," which I have before asserted to be, in our opinion, a most illegitimate use of public funds. The direct effect of doing so will be to afford just grounds for the allegations against this School contained in the petition from fifteen Drawing Masters in Manchester, recently presented to Parliament by Mr. BRIGHT, for a withdrawal of the Grant from it. Hitherto there have been no such grounds for petition against this School, and they evidently rest on the supposition that it actually is what "the Department" would make it. In addition to this many of our most liberal subscribers, best capable of appreciating the value of the education in the principles of Design afforded

by this School to the young men in their employment, have announced their determination to withdraw their subscriptions if the changes in progress are persisted in.

But it is not to be believed that an enlightened Government would sanction, on the part of their subordinates, such wholesale abolition of education in the principles of Design throughout the whole country, without proposing to do something in that direction somewhere. And as to what the future plan of operations may be, we are not left wholly to conjecture.

A sum exceeding by several hundred pounds the aggregate amount of the portion of the Parliamentary Grant allotted to the thirteen Provincial Schools of Design is placed at the absolute disposal of Marlborough House, (for we know not exactly how to term that institution,) independently of the salary of the Secretary to the Department of Science and Art, which is charged to another account. There Museums of Art are being collected, in which an arbitrary taste may or may not prevail—there exhibitions of the drawings of the students of the Schools of Design are held—thence emanate imperative orders as to the nature of the studies to be exhibited—thence every regulation for the course of *instruction* to be pursued in the provinces—thence the examples to be copied, and a list of subjects to be studied by our pupils; and if a Provincial Master venture the slightest remonstrance, he is told he ought to resign,—a hint that, in case of his entertaining any opinion of his own, his resignation will not in future be a matter of option.

It is obviously intended that this Central Institution should assume to itself the entire education of the future Masters of Schools of Design, and thereby become a mighty dictatorship on all questions of taste and decoration; but I appeal to the experience of every one acquainted with Art or its application, whether this must not necessarily engender the most mischievous mannerism. The plan evidently rests on the plausible pretext, that Provincial Masters can know but little of the principles of Art; and must be duly indoctrinated at the metropolitan seats of knowledge before they can become qualified as teachers of Art to build up again those provincial colleges of an educational character that are at present being so industriously pulled down. With this view, the use to be made of Provincial Schools at present is to employ their funds and their Masters in so extensively instituting initiatory drawing classes as to enable "the Department" to select students to be educated at the public expense at Marlborough House, to have their tastes *formed*, and being educated as Masters, to be sent back into the provinces to inoculate the multitude all over the country. It appears to me impossible to draw any other conclusions than these from the premises, and if the present opportunity be neglected, so skilfully has the plan been developed, that little hope will be left for the emancipation of the Provincial Schools hereafter.

Were I or any member of this Council influenced by any but a sense of public duty, I might have extended my remarks to the mode in which Local Councils

have been dealt with by "the Directors of the Department" in carrying out the steps by which these proposed changes are being effected; for this has been as insulting to our common sense as it has been unworthy "the Department." First flattered with praise of our School, we were solemnly assured that no interference was contemplated either with the objects or application of the grant to us. We were to be even more unfettered than formerly in our direction, &c. &c. We were played with and cajoled (though not entirely blinded) with promises, as might be done with a child to induce him to give up a favourite toy, too valuable to be entrusted to his rude hand. Had a more open course been pursued by "the Department," we might, indeed, have opposed it on principle; but there would have been no offence. As it is, we cannot recall to mind, without indignation, the stealthy, insidious steps by which it has been sought to gain ends too detrimental to Provincial Art Education to be acknowledged, and conducive only to central aggrandisement. The necessary consequence has been, that all our confidence in "the Department" has ceased.

But, Sir, this, is far from being the spirit in which I am desirous of addressing you. The subject is one of much too great national as well as local importance to admit the influence of personal feelings into its discussion; and on these grounds, and these alone, I venture earnestly to beseech you, with respect to our own particular School of Design in Manchester, to exert all the influence you can command to induce the Board of Trade to reconsider their resolutions as to its future conduct. It has risen from a position of contempt to one of prosperity and respect, during the few years that it has been left entirely untrammelled by Government interference; and it is well known to most of the members of its Council, that its inefficiency for several years was almost, if not altogether, owing to injudicious interference on the part of the Authorities of Somerset House with the course of instruction adopted. It is impossible to regard a renewed interference, so much more subversive of its whole constitution and objects than any previously attempted, without the conviction that it will prove utterly destructive of all that has been already effected. It is not to be doubted that when the subject is properly represented to their Lordships of the Board of Trade, all that we now find to complain of will be remedied; but the probable immediate effects of the changes proposed are greatly to be regretted, as likely materially to interfere with the completion of that highly advantageous arrangement we hoped to carry out with the Manchester Royal Institution, which afforded, through the assistance of its Professors of Science and Art, including Chemistry, Anatomy, History, and Literature, a prospect of advancing Art-Education to an eminence to which our previous limited means did not permit us to aspire, and such as has not yet been attempted in this country.

I have now completed my ungracious task, the sole object of which was to shew that it behoves those who take an interest in National Art-Education to be upon their guard against central usurpation,

In conclusion, I shall only advert to the most important boon yet accorded to Provincial Schools of Design, which we owed* entirely to the new Departmental Government, and which has proved a most valuable stimulus to the exertions of our Pupils. I allude to the public Exhibition of their Works in Marlborough House, and the award of Prizes by two of the most eminent Artists we possess,—Sir CHARLES EASTLAKE, and Mr. DANIEL MACLISE, R.A. I shall not dwell on the great good which this was calculated to effect upon all the Provincial Schools, nor on the advantages of thus making them their own vindicators or accusers—according as they have well or ill employed their time and means; but I cannot help thinking that this Exhibition, yearly or half-yearly, should be evidence sufficient to the Board of Trade, whether the grant of public money made to the various Schools is well or ill applied by their local Directors, and ought to afford very ample means to enable a Central Direction to judge where special interference on the part of Government is called for, or even, it may be, withdrawal of the grant.

I trust, Sir, that you will be able to satisfy their Lordships that something more than mere instruction in the art of Drawing is requisite in the education of Art-Workmen, and those who are to become the Architects, Designers, and Decorators of future generations; and that instead of degrading the character of Art-Education at present attainable in the Provinces, you will be able to convince them of the entire propriety as well as national importance of promoting, by even increased means, that cultivation of the science of Art, which can only be effected through the fostering aid of public funds or private endowment.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

CHARLES W. BELL.

* It is with great regret that I find myself under the necessity of making use of the past tense in speaking of the truly beneficial influence of these exhibitions, for orders recently received regarding the subjects for the pupils' study for exhibition and competition are so arbitrary, and in some cases, in our opinion, so injurious to the best interests of the School and of its pupils, as to have been refused the sanction of the Local Council, on principles they hold to be fundamental. I allude here especially to the practice in the School of that direct application of Design to Trade necessities which requires its special adaptation to the use of machinery for its reproduction. The subject has been fully discussed in the last four annual reports of the School. No notice has been taken of the remonstrance of the Council beyond an intimation to the Masters, at a recent meeting in London, that if they cannot effect what they are ordered to do, their successors may do better. Thus these exhibitions are becoming instruments for the subjection, rather than, as we had hoped, for the emancipation of Provincial Schools from Metropolitan thralldom. And Local Councils are expected, in gratitude for the respect thus shown to their opinions, to exert themselves to find funds for providing accommodation, light, attendance, and the general maintenance of Schools conducted in every way directly in opposition to the principles, by steady adherence to which the support of the public had been gained for them. Such is the "improved and more self-supporting system of management" proposed, and this the way of keeping the word of promise to the ear expressed by "relieving the Committee" from their obligations and responsibilities, as recipients of the Parliamentary Grant.